

Women face internet access challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda

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INTRODUCTION

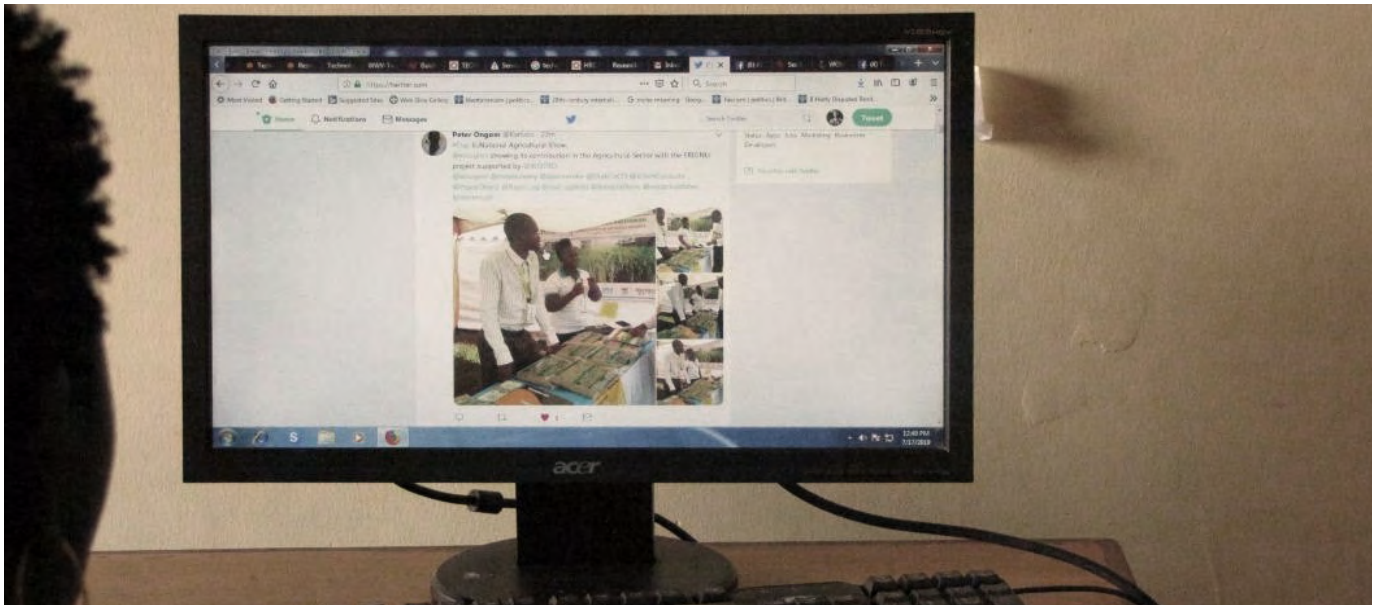
This article analyses the challenge of internet access faced by women and other marginalised groups such as persons with disabilities in Uganda during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It discusses how limited or no access to the internet affects women's digital human rights, as set out in the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms (African Declaration).¹ The article deals with existing information and communications technology (ICT) and internet policy gaps and COVID-19 national response strategies, and suggests possible recommendations to ensure a gender inclusive response with a special focus on women and other marginalised groups during and after the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered lifestyles and caused unprecedented governmental actions, including lockdowns and physical and social distancing measures. The pandemic rapidly increased internet usage for social interaction, advocacy work, business meetings, information sharing, online shopping, transactions, deliveries and online studies.

However, internet usage in Uganda is hindered by limited internet access, largely due to social media and mobile money taxation introduced in 2018. Additionally, costly internet data, poor connectivity, limited infrastructures especially in rural areas and slow internet speed have hit hardest on women's rights online.

Uganda has one of the lowest internet penetration rates (14%) of the 10 African countries surveyed by Research ICT Africa (RIA) as part of the Global South After Access Survey conducted between 2017 and 2018. Besides the low internet penetration, less than half of the population own a mobile phone. Also,

¹ <https://africaninternetrights.org/articles/>



while data prices in Uganda appear competitive and relatively low compared to other African countries, data use remains constrained, even for those who have managed to overcome the price barrier of an internet-enabled device.²

The gender gap in Uganda's internet use is described as moderate, at 25% percent, but is larger than the gender gap in South Africa (12%), Lesotho (14%) and Senegal (21%).³

↑ A woman reading information on Twitter
Photo Credit: WOUGNET

BACKGROUND

In Uganda, the government enforced a national lockdown in March 2020. As a result, many organisations have resorted to working remotely, using digital platforms like Zoom, Jitsi, Webex, Skype, BlueJeans and Google Hangouts to hold meetings with colleagues and partners and attend international conferences during the lockdown. For instance, worldwide, the user base of the Zoom video conferencing app "grew by another 50% to 300 million in the last three weeks at the beginning of April," according to Reuters.⁴

With the lockdown, schools and institutions of higher learning closed, and this left students with only the option to study online or through TV. The closure of schools and day care centres has had a differential impact on women because they have to sacrifice their personal data for their children to be able to access classwork from the online platforms. On 1 June, during a presidential address on COVID-19, the government promised to provide at least two TV sets for each of the over 68,733 villages in the country to support long-distance

2 Gilwald, A., et al. (2019). *After Access: The State of ICT in Uganda*. Research ICT Africa. https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_After-Access-The-State-of-ICT-in-Uganda.pdf

3 Ibid.

4 Reuters. (2020, 22 April). Zoom participant numbers top 300 million despite growing ban list, shares hit record (April 23). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zoom-video-commn-encryption/zoom-users-top-300-million-as-ban-list-grows-idUSKCN22420R>

learning, an initiative more expensive than the cost of internet access.

The lack of internet access in Uganda is becoming even worse during the pandemic, especially for marginalised groups. Many people in these categories accessed and used the internet at workplaces and public access points such as restaurants and cafes that have been closed due to lockdown. Not all people have equal access in terms of bandwidth, suitable devices and necessary



software. This caused many to go offline, further deepening the gender digital inequalities. The 2020 Mobile Gender Gap report shows that “the unconnected are disproportionately less educated, rural, and female.”⁵

↑ ICT training at Refugee Settlement, Arua District in February 2020
Photo Credit: Platform Africa

Digital inequalities can cause double inequalities, especially limiting opportunities for women and girls to acquire new skills and access accurate and relevant information online. Technology should be looked at and prioritised as an equaliser, not a divider.

One of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to achieve universal and affordable internet access for all by 2020, but in Uganda, many people, especially women, are still offline. With COVID-19 and the current rate of internet growth and adoption disrupted by expensive data, the country suffers a lack of competition in the telecoms sector. Currently, Uganda has only six companies providing internet-related services, with additional limitations such as imposed social media taxation, slow internet speed, lack of broadband affordability, poor infrastructure, etc. Therefore, affordable internet will not be achieved by 2020.

Uganda’s Ministry of Health has established call centres for sharing updates related to COVID-19 and also extensively uses its various social media platforms. However, these require internet access and digital tools, which are

5 Rowntree, O., & Shanahan, M. (2020). *Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020*. GSMA <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>

still lacking among marginalised groups and communities.

Women are also constrained by inadequate digital skills, limited empowerment, expensive ICT tools, poor broadband connectivity, online safety concerns and relevant content online, according to the World Wide Web Foundation.⁶

Internet access is power, yet the online space is dominated by a patriarchal influence that often excludes women and women's issues online. Sometimes, even families disprove of women's activities online.

Principle 2 of the African Declaration provides for internet access and affordability, which is key during this pandemic. Principle 10 deals with rights for marginalised and at-risk groups and principle 13 focuses on gender equality.

However, women and other marginalised groups are least likely to have access to and use the internet due to factors such as high internet costs and unpaid care work, among others. The gender gap that existed before the COVID-19 outbreak has widened. With the lockdown, women and girls in abusive relationships are faced with increased control and internet access restrictions due to their confinement with abusers during lockdown periods.

Internet service providers have come up with supportive measures to promote access and use of the internet. MTN has introduced work-from-home bundles from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (Monday to Friday) at a fee of 2,000 Uganda shillings (USD 0.53). MTN has also provided free access to "some" education sites.

The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) published a blog post providing ways to use internet data more efficiently without recognising that internet access is the first priority.⁷ They articulated how internet users can make the most use of their internet connection while at home, but this only applies to the few who already have access. These tips ignore the reality of a worsening gender digital divide.

Previous government initiatives such as free public Wi-Fi are only available in selected areas in Kampala city which excludes rural people and persons with disabilities who have mobility problems. Also, the time is not favourable for women as the service is available starting at 6:00 p.m. when women are usually occupied by domestic chores. During the lockdown period, free Wi-Fi remains limited and irrelevant. Internet access may be even worse with incoming 5G technology that requires more data for higher speeds.

To make matters worse, the 2018 social media tax – also called "over-the-top" or OTT tax – still requires every internet user to pay daily taxation of 200 Uganda shillings (USD 0.054) in order to access social media sites. The tax forced over five million internet users offline in three months. Other government taxes such as "pay-as-you-earn" (PAYE) personal income tax increased during

6 World Wide Web Foundation. (2015). *Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment*. <https://webfoundation.org/research/womens-rights-online-2015>

7 Uganda Communications Commission. (2020, 29 April). How to Optimize Your Internet Data Bundle As You Continue to Stay and Work at Home following the COVID-19 Lockdown. <https://uccinfo.blog/2020/04/29/how-to-optimise-your-internet-data-bundle-as-you-continue-to-stay-and-work-at-home-following-the-covid-19-lockdown>

the pandemic. According to Oxfam Uganda, the exchange rate has increased by 45% to an average of 3,800 Uganda shillings per USD. In 2012/2013, the PAYE threshold, which was equivalent to USD 94, is now equivalent to USD 64, implying a net reduction of USD 30 in earnings, which could explain the increasing poverty levels.⁸

PANDEMIC WIDENS THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDES

Like in most African countries, internet access is not free in Uganda. The internet is a social construct that impacts men and women differently. Previously, most women working in the formal sector accessed the internet at their workplaces, and now the majority are battling between the cost of internet and daily household needs. The Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) reported in March 2020 that 71% of women work in the informal sector, including retail business, markets, hospitality, vendors, and petty trade.⁹ Retail and service industries have been among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 response. This means these women are not entitled to receive paid sick leave or family leave and hold no health insurance and social security, seriously threatening their livelihood.¹⁰

In Uganda, women are also primary caregivers. On average, they spend about eight hours daily on unpaid care, leaving them with less time for paid work.¹¹ This means they are more likely to live in poverty, hence internet access becomes a luxury for women, rendering those without access more vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation.

Although women may have access to tech tools such as a mobile phone, married women – especially in rural areas – say their husbands restrict usage at home. According to 2019 research conducted by the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) on the case of mobile broadband in Uganda:

When each of the female respondents was asked where they obtain their money to buy data, 26% said they obtain the money mainly from their spouse and some quickly added that this comes with added costs with the spouse demanding to know who else she communicated to with the data they obtained.¹²

8 Tax Justice Alliance Uganda secretariat: SEATINI-Uganda. (2020, 1 April). Rethinking the Domestic Revenue Mobilisation Strategies Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic in Uganda. *Oxfam Uganda*. <https://uganda.oxfam.org/latest/press-release/rethinking-domestic-revenue-mobilisation-strategies-amidst-covid-19-pandemic>

9 UWONET. (2020, 27 March). Press Release on Brutality and Use of Excessive Force by Security Forces in Enforcement of President's Directives on COVID-19. <https://www.uwonet.or.ug/press-release-on-brutality-and-use-of-excessive-force-by-security-forces-in-enforcement-of-presidents-directives-on-covid-19>

10 Wandera, D., & Muganga, E. (2020, 22 May). Children with hydrocephalus disease suffer during lockdown. *Daily Monitor*. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Children-hydrocephalus-suffer-lockdown-Museveni-Mbale/688334-5560358-3669gvz/index.html>

11 Oxfam Uganda. (2018, 28 August). Generations of Work Without Pay. <https://uganda.oxfam.org/latest/press-release/generations-work-without-pay>

12 Amuge, P. O., & Kakamagi, E. (2019). *Examining Women's Access to Digital Platforms: A Case of Mobile Broadband in Uganda*. WOUGNET. <http://wougnet.org/files/mydocs/women-access-to-digital-platform-download-version-1.pdf>

During this lockdown, the gender digital divide has further limited women's ability to work remotely. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020 findings show that there remains a "substantial mobile gender gap across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) as over 300 million fewer women than men access the internet on mobile, and women are 8% less likely than men to own a mobile phone." The report further cites that "although the mobile internet gender gap is narrowing in LMICs, women still remain 20% less likely than men to use mobile internet."¹³



The Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports, UNICEF and the National Information Technology Authority have introduced "a free of charge and easy to use digital learning platform called Kolibri with education content approved by the National Curriculum Development Centre in Science and Mathematics for Secondary School learners and inclusive education for primary to keep children learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic."¹⁴

However, to access Kolibri, the child needs "internet connectivity and gadgets such as a desk computer, laptop, or smartphone," according to UNICEF Uganda.¹⁵ This is something Uganda is not ready for due to high internet and ICT costs, limited electricity, and poor infrastructure, especially in rural areas.

↑ Refugees using ICTs at Rhino Refugee Settlement in Arua District in February 2020
Photo Credit: Platform Africa

13 Rowntree, O., & Shanahan, M. (2020). Op. cit.

14 UNICEF. (2020, 26 March). UNICEF scales up support in 145 countries to keep children learning, as COVID-19 forces majority of schools worldwide to close. *UNICEF Uganda*. <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/press-releases/unicef-scales-support-145-countries-keep-children-learning-covid-19-forces-majority>

15 Ibid.

WOUGNET conducted a phone call interview with Iribagiza David, a fourth-year law student at Uganda Christine University, on 1 June. Iribagiza told WOUGNET that the university wanted to conduct online examinations, but that the government halted the plan due to internet access challenges for some students in rural areas who could not access internet facilities and ICT gadgets.¹⁶

“The students had mixed reactions, with a few embracing online studies and many against it, citing reasons like limited internet access, poor network and electricity problems due to constant load shedding in Uganda,” he added. Iribagiza supposed female students would be more affected due to negative attitudes and cultural norms regarding gender and internet usage.¹⁷

When previous health emergencies occurred in Uganda, such as Ebola, girls were often removed from or left schools first to attend to needs at home, even when schools remained open.¹⁸ According to a 2018 UWONET report on unpaid care work, girls spend about 4.8 hours a day on unpaid care and domestic work while boys spend 3.8 hours. Although men’s care workload decreases as they get older, girls’ workload increases, leaving them with less time for leisure and school work.¹⁹ With COVID-19, girls’ home schooling has worsened due to limited internet and pressure to perform domestic chores.²⁰

During the lockdown, most women in rural areas could not recharge their mobile phones due to inadequate access to electricity, as potential charging points were closed. Most women depend on families and their husbands for finances including charging and internet costs.

On 1 June, WOUGNET spoke to Grace Aceng, who lives in the rural area of Apac district, to understand what internet access has been like for her during this pandemic. Aceng told WOUGNET that the pandemic has brought additional challenges for women, such as financial disruptions, since most of the rural women depend on market vending but have not been able to run their businesses.²¹

Aceng added that the few women who accessed and used the internet before cannot afford it anymore due to the temporal closure of their businesses that previously supported them to buy airtime and data and pay OTT tax. “We face the challenge of slow internet speed, and most of the information sent on COVID-19 is in English. While I understand some words, I don’t understand others,” Aceng said.²²

16 Interview with Iribagiza David, a fourth-year law student at Uganda Christine University on 1 June 2020.

17 Ibid.

18 OHCHR. (2020, 15 April). COVID-19 and women’s human rights. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/COVID-19_and_Womens_Human_Rights.pdf

19 Uganda Women’s Network. (2015). *On Rapid Care Analysis (RCA) & Household Care Survey (HCS) in Lamwo District, Acholi Sub-Region, Northern Uganda*. <https://www.uwonet.or.ug/download/on-rapid-care-analysis-rca-household-care-survey-hcs-in-lamwo-district-acholi-sub-region-northern-uganda-2015/>

20 World Bank Group. (2020, 16 April). Policy Note: Gender dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/618731587147227244/pdf/Gender-Dimensions-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf>

21 Interview with Grace Aceng, a farmer in Apac District, 1 June 2020.

22 Ibid.

Women face limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information as well. For example, non-governmental organisations such as Uganda Youth Alliance for Family Planning and Adolescent Health (UYAFPAH) are now employing social media to bridge the gap on access to SRHR services and information by peers during the lockdown and for those unable to access social media, they are using peer educators in different communities.²³ However, social distancing has impacted the ability to do physical outreach.

Evelyn Lirri, a female freelance journalist, shared her experience on internet access during the pandemic via WhatsApp with WOUGNET on 18 May. Lirri said that internet access remains challenging in terms of cost:

I buy monthly data for 50,000 Uganda shillings (USD 13), which is 20 gigabytes, but the speed is so slow, sometimes it doesn't work, yet I rely heavily on the internet to do my work, research, conduct interviews, etc. I have failed to attend some Zoom meetings where experts are speaking about COVID-19 because the internet is slow and unreliable.²⁴

People with disabilities also have low incomes and cannot afford expensive internet rates in Uganda, including expensive assistive technologies. According to a 2018 UCC study on access and usage of ICTs by people with disabilities (PWDs) in Uganda, it found that "there is still a huge gap in access and use of ICTs by PWDs majorly caused by high prices of ICT assistive technologies in relation to their incomes, ignorance and limited educational opportunities, lack of affirmative action and waiver of policies on PWDs, awareness of location to access the devices, no suitable technologies for PWDs, lack of awareness and information on ICT for PWDs."²⁵

The study further showed that "only 15% mentioned they were able to access the internet and 25% didn't know about the internet whilst more male PWDs (6.2%) accessed it than their female counterparts (4%)."²⁶

On 19 May, WOUGNET spoke to Shamim Nampijja from the National Union of Women with Disabilities (NUWODU) about the experience of PWDs during the pandemic. Nampijja mentioned that the government had excluded PWDs from the COVID-19 National Task Force. She revealed that OTT tax is one of the limiting factors to internet access for PWDs. "Women and girls with disabilities in the rural areas have been disproportionately affected by lack of internet access hence a lack of access to information," she said. "Most of the COVID-19 related discussions on national television, radio have been carried forward without including PWDs," she added.²⁷

23 <https://www.facebook.com/846550665392209/posts/2930157317031523/>

24 Interview with Evelyn Lirri, a female freelance journalist in Kampala District, 18 May 2020.

25 Uganda Communications Commission. (2018). *Access and Usage of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTS) by People with Disabilities (PWDs) in Uganda*. https://www.ucc.co.ug/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Final-Report-on-Access-and-Usage-of-ICTs-by-PWDs_Public-Dissemination.pdf

26 Ibid.

27 Interview with Shamim Nampijja from the National Union of Women with Disabilities (NUWODU), 19 May 2020.



↑ Photo Credit: Platform Africa

The second principle of the African Declaration states that internet access should be available and affordable to all people in Africa without discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or another status.

However, women and marginalised groups in Uganda continue to struggle to access the internet and these divides have only widened during the pandemic. This is a threat to the achievement of Uganda's Digital Vision 2040, which intends to empower its citizens with the aim to achieve the goals of universal inclusion, sustainable development, economic progress and poverty eradication through digital innovation.²⁸

The gender divide may also affect the achievement of the UN's SDG 1.4, which is to ensure that all men and women, especially the poor and vulnerable groups, have equal rights to economic resources and appropriate new technology by 2030;²⁹ as well as SDG 5(b), which focuses on the use of enabling technologies, in particular ICTs, to promote women's empowerment.³⁰

High internet costs with OTT taxes have forced many internet users to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to access the internet for education, information, communication and commerce. However, VPN usage consumes more data because the encryption process may add about 10-15% more data usage based on the strength of the encryption process. Besides data consumption, privacy issues remain questionable.³¹ Many women use VPNs despite putting their privacy at risk.

28 <https://ict.go.ug/initiatives/digital-uganda-vision>

29 <https://indicators.report/targets/1-4/>

30 <https://indicators.report/goals/goal-5/>

31 Uganda Communications Commission. (2020, 29 April). Op. cit.

The Ugandan government put several COVID-19 legal measures and policies in place that greatly helped to flatten the curve of COVID-19 spread. For example, the Public Health (Control of COVID-19) Rules, 2020 under Sections 11 and 27 of the Public Health Act banned or closed many public gatherings and meetings.³² However, the government did not provide alternative ways to access information about these laws and policies offline.

Uganda was recently recognised as the country in Africa with the most favourable laws on ICT, but not much has been done yet to connect unconnected communities.³³ Uganda has only one community network, Battery-Operated System for Community Outreach (BOSCO) Uganda.³⁴ However, with the new normal of social distancing, the number of women accessing the centres for internet access and use has decreased, as confirmed by a BOSCO Uganda staff member.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has not affected everyone equally. Governments and stakeholders need to fight existing inequalities like the gender digital divide, which further widened due to the pandemic. The internet is a key public good. At a time when most activities take place online, internet access must be a top priority. The Ugandan government should consider endorsing the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms to ensure digital human rights.

Gender-inclusive public access policies must be developed to actively support women and other specific marginalised groups to get online. Women who face barriers to access devices and data at home must be able to connect online in safe, established locations such as marketplaces or near schools.

Both the public and private sectors in Uganda should work to build an inclusive broadband pro-competition regulatory framework with incentives that encourage investment and innovation for the country to reach universal access. This will help the government reduce internet-related costs and give more people – especially women and marginalised groups – the opportunity to get online.

The government should also scrap the social media tax and reduce taxes on ICT tools, data and internet services. Telecom companies should zero-rate public service sites so that people do not have to use their data to access useful information during a pandemic.³⁵

32 Uganda Legal Information Institute. (2020, 25 March). COVID-19 Legal and Policy Response Resource Guide for Uganda. <https://ulii.org/blogs/admin/25-march-2020/covid-19-legal-and-policy-response-resource-guide-uganda>; Ministry of Public Service. (2020, 25 March). Circular Letter No. 3. of 2020: Guidelines on Preventive Measures Against Corona Virus (COVID-19). https://ulii.org/system/files/CIRCULAR%20LETTER%20NO.%203%20OF%202020%20COVID-19_recognized.pdf

33 https://twitter.com/UCC_Official/status/1186551803967619072

34 <http://boscouganda.com>

35 Sarpong, E. (2020, 15 April). Covid-19 shows why internet access is a basic right. We must get everyone connected. *World Wide Web Foundation*. <https://webfoundation.org/2020/04/covid-19-shows-why-internet-access-is-a-basic-right-we-must-get-everyone-connected>

To achieve internet access and affordability, there is a need for the Ugandan government to adhere to the principles of the 2019 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, specifically the right to internet access as set out in Part IV, Principle 37, which includes these obligations:

3. States shall, in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, adopt laws, policies and other measures to provide universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the internet without discrimination, including by:

a. developing independent and transparent regulatory mechanisms for effective oversight;

b. improving information and communication technology and internet infrastructure for universal coverage;

c. establishing mechanisms for regulating market competition to support lower pricing and encourage diversity;

d. promoting local access initiatives such as community networks for enabling the increased connection of marginalised, unserved or underserved communities; and

e. facilitating digital literacy skills for inclusive and autonomous use.

4. In providing access to the internet, States shall take specific measures to ensure that marginalised groups have effective exercise of their rights online.³⁶

This will ensure sustainability for women's rights online and narrow the gender digital divide as set out in Principle 13 of the African Declaration.³⁷

36 <https://www.achpr.org/presspublic/publication?id=80>

37 <https://africaninternetrights.org/articles>